

BAGRAM, Afghanistan, Oct. 29, 2003 - Every day the soldiers of Company B, 41st Engineer Battalion, 10th Mountain Division [<http://www.drum.army.mil/division/41stEngr/index.html>], perform a job where death is potentially only one step away. These Army combat engineers aren't fighting the Taliban or al Qaeda on the front lines, but they're skating the razor's edge performing their mission of manually clearing land mines and unexploded ordnance in Bagram's own back yard.

Most land mine area clearance here is performed within the safe cocoon of a de-mining vehicle such as the Hydrema or Aardvark, where soldiers are protected behind tons of steel and destroy mines in place with the vehicle's heavy, flailing chains. But Afghanistan's uneven terrain creates some places where the massive vehicles can't go. At these times the "sapper" foot soldiers -- protected only by body armor plates, a Kevlar helmet with clear plastic blast shield, blast protective boots, and armed with a diligent mind and a mine detector -- must complete the job.

The two platoons of sappers here are clearing sites near the base runway for the future expansion of Bagram Air Base. The soldiers work in teams of two; one soldier goes in with a mine probe and checks a small area, and the other soldier, equipped with the AMPSS-14 mine detector, goes over the area to ensure it is mine-free.

For the engineers, this type of mine clearance can be a very slow process, with the soldiers clearing only a fraction of what a mine clearing vehicle could accomplish in a day. For this type of job, being deliberate, safe and thorough are necessities.

"This is very methodical, tedious, meticulous area clearance," said Capt. James Handura, Company B commander, adding that normally combat engineers are trained for combat operation mine clearance, where they quickly breach a minefield so that other units can pass through.

To prepare for this new type of mission in Afghanistan, where they are Helping to rewrite the Army manuals on minefield area clearance, the soldiers had to go through extensive training prior to starting the job, according to Sgt. 1st Class Thomas Hecker, platoon sergeant, 3rd Platoon.

The soldiers first went to Fort Leonard Wood, Mo., for weeks of training on the new mine detectors. Once arriving in Afghanistan, they were trained by the preceding engineer unit and certified on the mine-clearing equipment.

And to ensure the soldiers stay sharp, the unit also holds weekly re-certification in which the sappers have to identify various mines and unexploded ordnance, Hecker added. "Our biggest enemy is complacency," said Pvt. Jeremy Gray, mine detector operator, 3rd Platoon. "I've just got to keep a clear head and keep focus on my job."

Many of the soldiers, like Gray, admit to never having expected to do this type of job in their military careers, and although the job can be stressful, the soldiers said they find it rewarding.

"I enjoy seeing progress in our work every day," said Gray, as the teams clear more and more area clear of land mines. Their work's impact will be felt beyond Afghanistan as well, according to 2nd Lt. Matthew Marino, 1st Platoon Leader, who said their experiences will help future Army engineers.

"This is a great opportunity for the sappers, because they're expanding the role of the combat engineer," Marino said. "This info can be passed to the (combat engineer) schoolhouse."

(Army Sgt. Greg Heath is assigned to the 4th Public Affairs Detachment.)

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